

Rae Greiner's sympathetic realism in nineteenth-century British fiction

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DOI:

[10.1353/sdn.2014.0034](https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2014.0034)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Mitchell, R 2014, 'Rae Greiner's sympathetic realism in nineteenth-century British fiction', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 129-130. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2014.0034>

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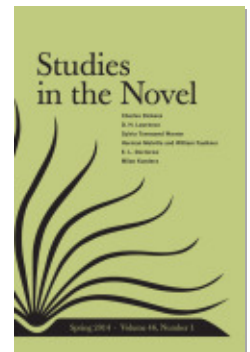
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Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction by Rae GREINER (review)

Rebecca N. Mitchell

Studies in the Novel, Volume 46, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp. 129-130
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/sdn.2014.0034



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GREINER, Rae. *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 224 pp. \$60.00 hardcover.

In a recent best-selling work, cognitive neuroscientist Simon Baron-Cohen described the absence of empathy as the very nature of evil. Such intense scientific focus on *Einfühlung*, a word which had no English equivalent until the twentieth century, follows on the heels of a concentration of interest in “fellow-feeling”—a more capacious term in earlier use—in the field of literary studies, and especially in the study of the novel. Accounts of British realist fiction have long acknowledged that instilling fellow-feeling in readers was the motive and *modus operandi* of novels like *Middlemarch*. Rae Greiner’s *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* adds to the critical discussion by working to “pry apart thinking and feeling” (3) and to expose the mechanisms of the “sympathetic protocols” (40) that drive realist fiction. Those protocols arise not merely from socially-conscious themes or meta-fictional commentary imploring readers to act or think in certain ways, but—Greiner argues—in the very form of the text: the rendering of dialogue, the “case” model, the narratorial perspective and, most importantly, the metonymic structure that defines the realist plot and mode of representation.

This focus on form distinguishes Greiner’s studies from other recent works on fellow-feeling in the nineteenth-century novel, including Suzanne Keen’s field-defining study *Empathy and the Novel*, which considers the responses provoked in readers by fiction; or Rachel Ablow’s and Audrey Jaffe’s analyses of affective extension in plot and theme; or the neuro-imaginative work of Kay Young or Alan Palmer, who explore the process of thinking depicted in and evinced by the novel. Greiner is interested less in how the reader responds to a novel’s effects than in the means through which the novel elicits or thwarts a response and the ways in which it depicts the reach and limitations of its characters’ sympathetic imaginations.

Before turning to works by Bentham, Austen, Trollope, Dickens, George Eliot, Conrad, and Henry James, Greiner establishes a foundational paradigm in Adam Smith’s cognitive model of interpersonal apperception. Fellow-feeling depends on fictions, Smith argues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; one can only ever imagine the feelings of the other, and sympathetic extension is thus “a highly creative process” (8). The relevance of this model to the fiction composed in its wake might seem self-evident, though Greiner is careful not to suggest that the authors she considers consciously enacted Smithian paradigms in their works. Rather, traces of Smith’s construction of the imaginative nature of interpersonal knowledge are mapped, first in the intersection of case studies, “historicizing fiction” (12), and history itself, as manifest in the works of Bentham, Austen, and R. G. Collingwood, whose works are fruitfully juxtaposed in chapter 2.

If for Bentham, any meaning in language is dependent on “expressive contexts” and “social-sympathetic processes” (12), Dickens’s plots, as Greiner argues in chapter 3, expose the risks of unsympathetic and anti-social contexts, where “estrangement *in language* is the alienation most painfully felt” (88, emphasis in the original). Her analysis is perhaps most illuminating here, as Dickens’s aphasic characters—Greiner focuses on *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Little Dorrit*—must depend entirely upon the “sympathetic communication” of those capable of interpreting their unintelligible utterances, acts of translation that demand a preternaturally sensitive imagination. In her fourth chapter, Greiner follows George Eliot’s lead, working to “disentangle sympathy, identification, and knowledge” (125). She attends to the nagging challenges posed by omniscience,

presumed omniscience, and over-sympathizing in works by Eliot (especially *The Lifted Veil* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*), Conrad (*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*) and James (*The Sacred Fount*).

Throughout the study, Greiner employs Roman Jakobson's metaphor/metonymy structure to underscore the idea that sympathy's affective extension, and thus realist fiction, functions metonymically. Like Jakobson, she relies on heuristic contrasts to make her argument, and the stakes of those contrasts become evident in the conclusion, where she aligns sympathy, realism, imagination, and metonymy in contradistinction to empathy, modernism, fusion, and metaphor. Sympathy is the mode of the realist, as evidenced through "its rejection of the tropes (and ideal) of fusion" (158), while empathy is the mode of the modernist.

Employed as an exercise intended to concentrate attention on those formal qualities that have all too often been overwhelmed by the novel or novelist's ardent pleas for altruism, this contrast is extremely useful. Greiner's readings are consistently smart and insightful, but one wonders if her resistance to the anachronism of terminology perhaps muddies the waters. Adam Smith's thoroughgoing insistence that fellow-feeling can always and only be an act of the imagination defines his conception of sympathy (since that was indeed the word he used), but it does not necessarily follow that, had "empathy" been in his lexicon, he would regard it—if understood, as Greiner suggests, as a genuine "fusion" of the self with the other—as an achievable enterprise or one entirely distinct from the sympathy he describes. Nevertheless, splitting thought from feeling, splitting the empathic impulse from the sympathetic impulse, and splitting the reader's reaction to the "training" presented by the novel from the novel's methods of training, gives Greiner purchase for nuanced formalist readings. Fellow-feeling emerges, perhaps not as the antidote to evil described by Baron-Cohen, but rather as a complex, if ultimately unsettled, construct that shapes realist novels and is, in turn, shaped by them.

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HOUSTON, Gail Turley. *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. 181 pp. \$55.95.

In *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God*, Gail Turley Houston presents a fascinating but neglected piece of feminist history. In chapter one, Houston introduces readers to a group of radical women who were active in millenarian and socialist feminist movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This group included outspoken prophets like Joanna Southcott, Eliza Sharples, Ann Lee, and Frances Wright. By imagining feminine manifestations of the divine and reconfiguring Eve as a deity or tragic heroine, these women ministered to what Houston calls the "mother-god-want" experienced by their followers, who felt alienated by the male-dominated Protestantism of their era (1). These Romantic-era "radical grandmothers" also paved the way for later feminist authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Florence Nightingale, and George Eliot, whose works "expand[ed] the divine metaphor to include women as omnipotent beings" (14). In so doing, these Victorian women writers not only legitimated their own